New Visions for Transforming Teaching

Those of us who work in schools understand the demands placed on teachers in the face of mounting pressures from parents, administrators, and standardized tests. It would be foolish to assume these demands don't overshadow aspirations to remain current in educational technology trends and tools. That is why it's more important than ever for ed tech coordinators to think of creative ways to entice teachers to participate in professional development beyond the occasional afternoon technology workshop.

It's a challenge we have grappled with over the years as the ed tech department for a high school district with more than 20,000 students and almost 3,000 full-time district employees. We have always worked to provide high-quality training in the form of after-school classes related to office productivity applications, gradebook programs, and general computing operations. Our department has hosted week-long summer institutions featuring high-end training in popular technologies such as 3D animation, Web site design, and digital video production. These programs and services were always well received, but we were aware that they had a minimal effect on the infusion of technology into classroom instruction. Many times our instruction focused on the great things you can do with technology, with little discussion of how you might implement it. Our offerings were disassociated, exclusionary, and idealized.

In dire need of a fresh approach, we set out to create a more comprehensive program with the intent to transform our department's reputation from a high-end tech shop that serviced only the most technically savvy to a less intimidating resource that would allow every teacher to feel comfortable regardless of skill level and ability. It involved making changes to our marketing and mode of delivery, as well as placing a newfound emphasis on accountability. Our new model, named "Visions in Education: Transforming Teaching Through Technology," turned out to be exactly what we needed to raise our department's support to the next level.

Marketing

Our first task was to alter our image. How could we make our services more appealing and relevant so that teachers who were marginally interested in technology would be more willing to attend our professional development opportunities? We knew our current "build it and they will come" approach was not cutting it, so we set aside our techie hats, put ourselves in our teachers' shoes, and realized we weren't connecting our trainings to the realities of classroom implementation. Instead of dealing in the hypothetical, we needed to spotlight best practices of those teachers already doing great things in their classrooms. Rather than playing the experts, we would become technology facilitators whose primary responsibility would be to provide a supportive environment that featured group collaboration and exploration. We would still run our programs, but instead of driving the bus, we'd be content to sit in the back and surrender control to teachers. We would pay stipends to these hand-picked lead instructors and provide them with the opportunity to share their success stories, communicate their challenges, and shine in front of their peers. We figured it would be a great way for us to reach teachers who might normally pass on our programs because the message would now be delivered by one of their peers.

We also knew it was critical that our new program be ongoing and not "one and done," so we decided to expand it beyond a week-long institution to

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By James W. Epler

Create Appealing, Meaningful, and Ongoing Professional Development for Teachers

an annual contract of participation. In exchange for their commitment, we would provide teachers with yearlong access to an LCD projector and subscriptions to online resources such as United Streaming, Nettrekker, and Atomic Learning for as long as they remained in our Visions program.

Structure

After agreeing on a new methodology, we turned our attention to program content and delivery.

Our first step was to recruit participants through an online application that included a skill assessment inventory and overview of the program. This application proved to be useful. First, it helped us identify who was really interested. If teachers took time out of their busy days to fill out our application, we figured they were serious about improving their strategies and were not just coming for the goodies. Second, because an application requirement was atypical for professional development sessions we'd hosted in the past, it added a certain luster to our program. Third, it helped us develop a fair and equitable selection process, which in turn helped us to better manage current costs and anticipate expenditures down the road. Last, it helped our lead instructors plan their presentations and adapt their messages according to participants' skill levels and experience. We would determine selection based on time-stamped submissions of applications, fill available spots in accordance with our current funding cycles, and mail welcome letters to teachers who were accepted.

Our overarching goal was to link skill building with pedagogy. On the first day of the institution, we had lead instructors give short presentations highlighting what they do with their students. Then we asked them to consider a piece of curriculum they currently teach and think about how they could enhance it with technology, with the objective of exploring how to make it happen.

To jump-start reflections, we grouped teachers by content area and had them review short multimedia clips at computer kiosks positioned around the room. As they moved with their groups from station to station, our lead instructors encouraged folks to think about what they had just seen in the videos and reflect on their current practices by answering questions we posed using a classroom integration matrix.

After a large group discussion, we then had people reconvene in their subject-area groups to work on individual project plans using a template that outlined their proposed enhancements to their curricula, their implementation strategies, and resources they thought they might need to make it happen during their participation in the program (see Visions Technology Integration: Initial Plan on page 25). Lead instructors were asked to encourage the sharing of ideas and strategies among teachers grouped in their subject areas during this time. These breakouts had the added benefit of providing an opportunity for content teachers to network among themselves and meet people who worked at different schools.

We made a conscious effort to deemphasize bells and whistles and focus on basic skills instruction. We expected everyone who attended to leave with at least the essential, baseline abilities, such as proficiency in PowerPoint and Inspiration. For those who were more advanced, we offered a flexible menu of choices including advanced techniques in presentation software, digital video, and Web 2.0 technologies. Teachers could decide whether they would engage in an introductory PowerPoint session, a Moodle workshop, or independent

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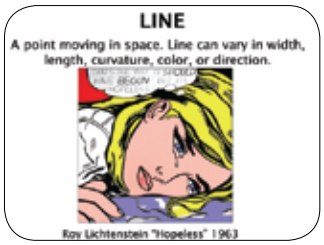
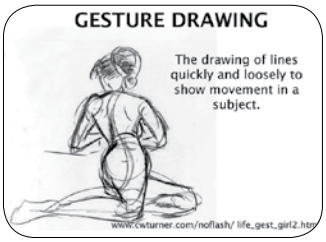
These images are part of a slide presentation about art vocabulary, found in the Teacher Exchange Artifact Repository (http://exchange.guhstd.net), where Vision participants can share their work.





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The Visions participant management tool, or personalized "dashboard," allows teachers to submit interest inventories, reflect on technology, upload Teacher Exchange artifacts, and enter their annual Visions requirements.

curriculum work time based on their interests and comfort levels with the presented technology. It was an excellent way for us to better service everyone's needs and had the added benefit of attracting advanced, moderately proficient, and beginning-level teachers to the program.

Assessment

From the start we knew we'd need to focus our attention on accountability to justify multi-year expenditures on projectors, subscription services, and stipends. We built in a way for teachers to communicate what they were doing after they left our trainings, understanding that anecdotal evidence would undoubtedly come in handy when we submitted requests to administrators for funding continuations in the years ahead. In return for our pledge of support and equipment for as long as they remained in the program, we stipulated that participants would need to complete a group of small but important annual requirements.

First, they had to provide our department with written reflections each year explaining how they use technology in their classrooms to improve their instruction. In this reflection we asked participants to identify the technologies they use, the approximate number of instructional hours affected, and how they implemented them. Additionally, we required them to upload two lesson resources or "artifacts" to our online teacher exchange repository to share with their peers. The exchange is searchable by subject area, keyword, and even school site. It provides a way for teachers to see what others are using in their classrooms

In the icebreaker activity, participating teachers organize into subject-area teams and move from station to station, jotting down thoughts related to kiosk presentations designed to prompt personalized reflection.

long after leaving our program. Finally, we asked them to tell us of at least two additional extension activities related to technology skill development they participate in over the course of the year. These could include conference attendance, follow-up technology trainings or university course offerings, and even peer-to-peer support. In this way we conveyed to them the importance of ongoing professional development and the continued enhancement of skill development and collaboration.

Reflections

Our decisions to modify our roles as instructors, to showcase leaders in front of their colleagues, to organize training

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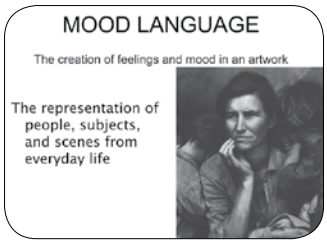

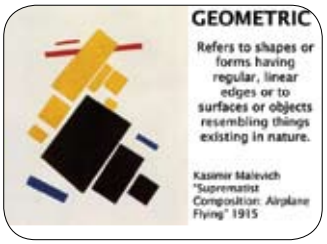

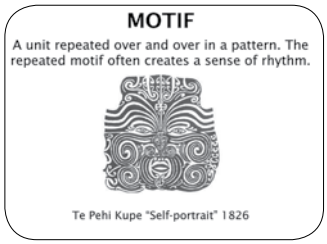

Visions Technology Integration: Initial Plan

Directions: Save this document as Last Name-Visions (ex. jones-visions.doc). Delete the *items in italics* below and complete the form. E-mail a copy of the finished proposal to your Visions lead instructor and to Educational Technology Resources.

Title of Initial Strategy or Project	
Description	*What is it?* *What technologies will you implement?*
Deliverables	*What will you upload to the ETR Teacher Exchange? Word files? PowerPoint? A Web site address?*
Instructional Rationale	*Why are you doing this project with this technology on this topic? Where does it fit in your curriculum? Standards?*
Implementation	*How will you use this project with your students—be as detailed as possible.*
Resources Needed	*What do you need to complete the project? Be specific: include applications, subject matter sources, etc.*
Process	*Outline the steps it will take to start and finish the project.*

After moving through the multimedia stations, teachers reconvene in their subject area groups to work on individual project plans using a template that outlines proposed enhancements to their curricula, their implementation strategies, and resources they thought they might need to make it happen during their participation in the program. Find PDF documents online at http://edtech.guhsd.net/visions/resources. Select Program Documents to access the files.

by subject area, to provide ample choices during skills training, to foster an environment featuring collaboration and sharing, and to maintain continuous context through ongoing communication were the efficacies needed to broaden our reach and strengthen our stature as a department.

Participants noted in evaluation surveys that they were not used to attending professional development seminars that offered bona fide choices based on their familiarity with the content. Many also remarked that they appreciated the opportunity to work with their peers in subject-area teams or independently on curriculum with our expertise just an arm's reach away. The promise of an LCD projector and continued access to resources has been a great way to maintain contact with our teachers long after they graduate from our program. We ask Visions alumni to check in with us at least once a year during an update session in which we brief them on new opportunities and resources available from our department. We continue to offer afternoon workshops, and we're pleased to see our Visions alumni signing up for additional offerings that may have gone unnoticed in the past. Help requests to our department have also increased now that word of our program has spread, and teachers are more likely to stop by to talk strategy when they read or hear about something new related to technology in the classroom. Principals at schools have provided our department with additional funding to include more of their teachers in our Visions program. Today our waiting list has more than 120 names, which tells us our initiative has helped raise awareness among faculty of the flexibility and impact technology can lend to their own instructional strategies and of the importance of ongoing learning in this area as part of our teachers' overall professional development aspirations.

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James W. Epler serves as the educational technology specialist for the Grossmont Union High School District in El Cajon, California. He has taught graduate classes in educational technology at San Diego State University and holds a MEd in instructional technology from the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia.

We'd Love to Hear From You at letters@iste.org